

VZCZCXRO5780
PP RUEHAG RUEHROV
DE RUEHCV #0367/01 0742236
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 142236Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0803
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHWH/WESTERN HEMISPHERIC AFFAIRS DIPL POSTS PRIORITY
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000367

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/14/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [CO](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: CHAVEZ SLIPPING IN THE POLLS; OPPOSITION STAGNANT

CARACAS 00000367 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Recent local polling data shows that President Chavez's approval rating is dropping to similarly low levels of support as he had in 2003. Local analysts cite economic problems and crime as well as the Chavez's effort to radicalize his administration in 2006 as the leading causes of this decline. Interestingly, there is no corresponding shift of support for opposition parties, which have only picked up marginal additional backing and still lag behind Chavez. Political neutrals or "ni-nis" are a growing plurality, and according to pollsters, they are becoming more critical of the government. There is still little reliable polling data available in the wake of Chavez's spat with Colombia, but early indications are that there is overwhelming local opposition to a conflict with Colombia and to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). End Summary.

DATOS: Chavez is Back to 2003

¶2. (C) Datos polling firm President Edmond Saade briefed the Ambassador March 14 on the results of the February 15 to 24 nationwide Datos "pulse" of Venezuelan public opinion. Saade said public confidence in President Chavez has slipped considerably since Chavez's re-election in December 2006 and is approaching the 2003 lowpoint. Saade said the percentage of Venezuelans who support Chavez completely or in part has dropped from 58 percent in the last quarter of 2006 to 34 percent in the first quarter of 2008. Saade also cautioned that Chavez's drop in the polls has not translated into commensurate gains for support for the opposition, which has increased only slightly to 27 percent. According to Datos, the "neutrals" ("ni-nis") are the fastest growing political group.

¶3. (C) Saade attributed Chavez's drop in the polls to economic problems in Venezuela, especially inflation, food scarcities, and crime. He noted that Chavez is increasingly perceived in the public's mind as responsible for such problems, despite the BRV efforts to blame external factors, including the USG. Saade also said that the number of Venezuelans who say they have benefited recently from one of the BRV's social programs ("misiones"), including the network of subsidized government markets ("Mercal") has dropped several points to below 50 percent. Saade further noted that the conversion to the Strong Bolivar currency

contributed to inflation and asserted that Venezuelans' real purchasing power has declined by 12 percent in the first two months of 2008.

Keller: Chavez's Approval Rating Dropping

¶4. (C) A group of Venezuelan business leaders said prominent local pollster Alfredo Keller told them March 7 that Chavez's approval rating has dropped to 38 percent. Keller conveyed a similar figure to visiting WHA Senior Advisor Tamburri and PAO in mid-February. At that time, Keller stressed that Chavez's unsuccessful effort to change the constitution cost him politically. Chavez's proposal to eliminate presidential term limits in particular was unpopular. He also lost grassroots support by trying to concentrate more power in the central government at the expense of state and local governments. Keller also said economic problems such as food shortages are eroding public trust in the Venezuelan president.

LASCO Focus Groups: Eye of the Beholder

¶5. (SBU) Two prominent political scientists from the Social Sciences Laboratory (LASCO) recently completed a focus group study of the opinions of middle and working class Venezuelans (Sectors C,D, and E) in five major metropolitan areas, including Caracas. They conclude that while Chavistas continue to be positive about Chavez's administration, even they are beginning to offer more criticism. They also note that the "ni-nis" have increased their criticism of both the government and Chavez. LASCO did not find, however, that the "ni-nis" are gravitating toward the opposition.

CARACAS 00000367 002.2 OF 002

Local Polls: Chavismo Slipping

¶6. (C) Opposition parties are commissioning numerous local polls as part of the process to determine unified opposition candidates for the November state and local elections. Primero Justicia shared Datanalisis polls of 400 persons in the Sucre borough of Caracas taken in October and December ¶2007. These polls state that Chavez's popularity appears to be dropping even in areas that until recently were Chavista strongholds. In October 2007, 31 percent of the respondents identified themselves as pro-government, but only 25 percent did so in December 2007. Interestingly, the number of respondents who identified with the opposition changed little -- from 19 percent in October 2007 to 23 percent in December ¶2007.

The Colombia Factor

¶7. (C) We have not yet seen any major polls taken in the wake of Venezuela's self-made crisis with Colombia and the ensuing diplomatic rapprochement at the Rio Group Summit in Santo Domingo. The LASCO focus group identified Venezuela's conflicted relationship with Colombia as a potential political liability to use against Chavez. Venezuelan daily "El Nacional" published a poll on March 9 conducted by Varianzas Opinion between February 27 and March 2 in which 68 percent of respondents questioned Venezuela's decision to close its borders with Colombia while 69 percent considered the FARC terrorists, despite Chavez's efforts to have the group recognized as "belligerents". (Comment: Embassy is not familiar with Varianzas Opinion. End Comment).

Comment

18. (C) President Chavez reportedly makes extensive use of the government's own polls. He is likely aware of his slipping popularity and the reasons for it. In recent weeks, he has devoted considerable time and attention during nationwide broadcasts ("cadenas") and his Sunday "Alo, Presidente" talk show to promote the BRV's social programs as well as the BRV's efforts to combat crime. Nevertheless, pollsters believe that the Chavez "teflon factor" is wearing thin absent tangible improvements in the daily lives of Venezuelans.

DUDDY